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Abstract

Throughout the period between the first British settlement in Australia (1788) and the federation of the six evolving colonies into a single federal Commonwealth (1901), military forces on land were provided first by the British government (to 1870) and later by part-time or professional volunteers locally recruited. The federal constitution made defence the sole prerogative of the central government, and among that government's earliest pieces of legislation were Defence Acts (1903 and 1904). The existing colonial naval and military forces were integrated under single commands, and all Australian males between the ages of 18 and 60 (except conscientious objectors on religious grounds) were in time of war, made liable for service in the citizen military forces, within Australia or its territories.

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Throughout the period between the first British settlement in Australia (1788) and the federation of the six evolving colonies into a single federal Commonwealth (1901), military forces on land were provided first by the British government (to 1870) and later by part-time or professional volunteers locally recruited. The federal constitution made defence the sole prerogative of the central government, and among that government's earliest pieces of legislation were Defence Acts (1903 and 1904). The existing colonial naval and military forces were integrated under single commands, and all Australian males between the ages of 18 and 60 (except conscientious objectors on religious grounds) were in time of war, made liable for service in the citizen military forces, within Australia or its territories.

In view of subsequent events and the debates which the idea of compulsory military service was to generate in both World Wars and the Vietnam war, the discussion in the early period was surprisingly uncontroversial. This was presumably because many Australians felt their country was vulnerable to foreign attack; they were aware of their remoteness from the protection of a great power, and their proximity to massive populations in Asia, whom they were determined to keep out of Australia. Furthermore, military conflict was in the public consciousness in all six colonies because of the war in South Africa (1899-1902) to which Australia contributed over 16,000 volunteers from a population of less than three million. The strongest supporters of compulsory training were on the political left, within the Australian Labor Party.

International events in the first decade of federation, especially Japan's victory over Russia in 1904-05, and her tension with the United States two years later, reinforced these attitudes. Civilian 'National Defence Leagues' were formed in Britain, New Zealand, and Australia to encourage military service, and in 1909, Alfred Deakin's 'Fusion' ministry amended the Defence Act to provide for compulsory part-time military training in peacetime: junior cadet training (age 12-14), senior cadets (14-18), and citizen forces (18-20) with a reserve force of ages 20-26. Some of the cadets were given naval training. The legislation was implemented two years later, with numerous exemptions (not including religious grounds) and many absentees had to be chased up

and, if apprehended, prosecuted.

When war came in 1914, Australia raised a large force of volunteers – the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) – to serve at Gallipoli and subsequently in France and Belgium. Conscripts, on the other hand, could only serve in Australian territory. As the war dragged on and casualty rates mounted among the British and Imperial forces, the Australian Labor government and especially its Prime Minister, W. M. Hughes, came under pressure to introduce conscription for overseas service, to fill the ranks decimated on the Western Front. Within the Labor Party there was now considerable resistance to conscription especially, but by no means only, from those of Irish descent. The Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, Daniel Mannix, lent his formidable weight to the anti-conscription campaign. Hughes felt that the government had the legal right to introduce a compulsory scheme, but because of the split in his own party and in the country at large, he put the question, somewhat ambiguously, to a referendum where it was lost by a narrow but definite margin, winning neither an overall majority of votes nor the votes in a majority of states.

As the war dragged on the attrition rate got worse, and in 1917 Hughes, leading a new government formed from a rump of the Labor Party and the Liberal Opposition, again put the question of conscription – even more ambiguously – to a national referendum, where it was more decisively rejected. Many returned soldiers, valuing the comradeship of volunteers and believing they were more efficient and reliable, joined the opposition.

Surprisingly, in the light of this rejection and the limited military value of compulsory service up to this time, it was retained after the war, though in a reduced form, and was only abolished in 1929, by the Scullin Labor government, on economic grounds. The gathering storm clouds in Europe in the mid-to-late 1930s and Japan's imperial expansion into Manchuria and 'China proper', eventually caused an increase in the part-time militia force levels, but did not result in conscription, such was the social and political weight against it. Only in October 1939, after the outbreak of war with Germany, did the conservative United Australia Party Government reintroduce compulsory training and then only for service in Australia. The militia had only the same limited obligation and so the second Australian Imperial Force had to be specially enlisted, again, wholly from volunteers. It engendered a high spirit among them, but it created, in effect, two armies with intense feeling between them.

It was only when the Japanese were hammering at Australia's gates in New Guinea, had bombed northern ports and shelled Sydney and Newcastle, that the Labor government led by John Curtin risked party disunity by extending the service liability of conscripts to islands of the South-West Pacific south of the equator. Conscripts thus fought

alongside volunteers in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, but it was never an easy relationship. Conscription ended when the war ended.

Hitherto the full-time component of the Australian army had comprised staff and instructional corps, garrison artillery units, and depot personnel. The formations that fought both wars were basically civilians led by civilians, although by 1945 the majority of Australian generals were professional soldiers. Units specially formed and recruited comprised the Australian army component of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan. These units then became the basis of the combat element of the Australian Regular Army, which were subsequently used as part of the British Commonwealth force in Korea. World War II had brought home to Australians their vulnerability, and the ANZUS Treaty (with New Zealand and the United States) was negotiated to ensure American defence of Australia if necessary against a re-armed Japan. But by the time the treaty was signed – in September 1951 – the government saw a more imminent threat, from aggressive militaristic communism that appeared a world-wide phenomenon directed from Moscow aimed at world domination. Events in Asia seemed to demonstrate that it was well on the way to achieving it.

The Menzies Liberal-Country parties coalition government, elected in late 1949, considered that a third world war, promoted by the USSR, was a distinct possibility. Accordingly, in addition to attempting (unsuccessfully) to ban the Communist Party, it reintroduced military conscription under the euphemistic title of 'National Service'. If this was a military move and not just a political one, it did not profit from the lessons of the two world wars. Service was only for three months full-time, and again it did not include an overseas commitment. Thus had more men than the Regular Army field force been required for overseas combat, as they were in Korea, they once again would have had to be specially enlisted, the Citizen Force training and organization being largely wasted. There may have been some benefit, as the government claimed was its intention, in developing 'national discipline and physical fitness', although some National Servicemen would have contested even that. There were numerous grounds for exemption from training including those 'whose conscientious beliefs do not allow them to engage in any form of naval, military, or air force service'.

During the early 1960s, two situations developed in South-East Asia that affected Australia's sense of security. The first was Indonesia's 'confrontation' of the new state of Malaysia (including the former British colonies of North Borneo and Sarawak and, initially, Singapore). This was a small but ugly war designed to fracture the new state. The second was the growing civil conflict in Vietnam which had been

divided by the 1954 Geneva agreements at the 17th parallel of latitude. The British government pressed Australia to be involved against Indonesia, and the Americans sought help to shore up the government and forces of South Vietnam. The small Australian Regular Army might have been able to manage a contribution to one or other of these, but not to both at the same time, and in late 1964 Sir Robert Menzies announced a new National Service scheme to be introduced early in the following year. This required 20-year-olds selected by a ballot of birthdays to serve full-time for two years, overseas if necessary, with a subsequent three years in the reserve, part-time Citizen Military Forces. Those selected could, alternatively, fulfil a longer period of reserve service.

In view of the history of opposition to conscription, it is surprising that there was initially so little resistance to the new scheme. The birthday ballot was capricious and arbitrary, but not patently unjust. But in the country at large there was disquiet about the situations to Australia's north, and especially about Indonesia which, since the late 1950s, had been acquiring arms, including modern fighter and bomber aircraft, submarines, and even a naval cruiser, from the Soviet Union. It was this national disquiet that made the new National Service scheme more acceptable, even when conscripts were sent to Vietnam to help the South defend itself, and to demonstrate to the US Australia's dependability as an ally. But the nature of that war, as fought by largely conscripted American forces, its moral ambiguities, and its uncertain relevance to the security of Australia, all came in the late 1960s to reinforce 'natural' resistance not only to compulsory combat service but also to compulsory service overseas. Churches, some educationalists, some politicians and other politically active groups combined to press the government to withdraw Australian troops from Vietnam, and even to urge young men to defy the law. The government was not deflected from its course, and only withdrew the forces in late 1971 and early 1972 *pari passu* with the American withdrawals. When the Whitlam Labor government came to power in late 1972, it cancelled the National Service legislation and withdrew the handful of Australian advisers left in Vietnam. In the seven years of this second National Service scheme, nearly 64,000 men had been conscripted, a quarter of whom saw service in Vietnam. Their combat efficiency was widely remarked upon.

As a footnote to Vietnam, in 1983 the Senate referred to the Standing Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs the whole question of 'Conscientious objection to conscripted military service'. The Committee recommended (Parliamentary Paper No 233/1985) that legislation should add to the present recognition of absolute conscientious belief to allow 'exemption from participation in a particular military conflict where to be compelled by law to do so

would violate the individual's sense of personal integrity'. Exemptions should be determined in proceedings which so far as possible are informal and non-adversarial before a tribunal of at least three members.

Most of the immigrants to Australia since World War II have come from countries with a history of compulsory military service. With or without such a program, it seems unlikely that sizeable Australian forces will be sent overseas in the foreseeable future, and conscription for home defence has never been a problem. It thus seems unlikely that Australia will again see the massed protests against conscription of the period 1966-71. And if there were a cause in which Australians believed, it is suggested that Australia's experience will, if belatedly, endorse the experience of other countries. It seems, further, that many conscripts are in fact willing to serve and can be a vital part of a nation's military strength.



World War I veteran on the 50th anniversary of Anzac Day